CHAPTER ONE

WRITING IN ENGLISH: A PERFORMATIVE ACT IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FICTION

As mentioned at the beginning of the Introduction, The New Yorker issue of 23 and 30 June 1997 marked fifty years of Indian independence with a celebration of the current international success of contemporary Indian fiction in English. Through the selection of some of the most representative novelists, Indian fiction in English is designated as a body of literature in its own right and, in doing so, also draws attention to the significance of their writing in English. In this act of celebration, this particular issue of the prestigious American literary periodical performs an almost symbolic act of recognition.

The editorial written by Bill Buford bears a particular significance. Buford is an emblematic figure in the history of the critical reception of recent Indian fiction in English, whose opinion would almost automatically have a strong impact upon readers. In 1997 he was fiction editor of The New Yorker, but had until 1995 been the editor of Granta, the prestigious Cambridge University magazine he turned into a quarterly. Granta had for a while been a forum for postcolonial literatures, in which Salman Rushdie and other Indian writers had published widely.

In his editorial, Buford stresses the important role played by Indian writers on the contemporary literary stage and considers 1981, the year Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children first came out, to be the turning point of Indian letters – internationally, if not so much in India itself. As Buford puts it, Midnight’s Children ‘made everything possible’ as it ‘showed Indian writers that great novels could be fashioned from Indian stories, with an Indian sensibility and a distinctly Indian use of the English language’.1 Whilst the important

1 Buford, ‘Comment: Declarations of Independence’, 6-8.
part played by *Midnight’s Children* in bringing Indian fiction into the limelight cannot be doubted, Buford capitalizes on Rushdie’s towering presence in order to point out two crucial features of Indian writing in English as a whole, which are the sources of its originality. One is its ‘Indian sensibility’, which coexists with its internationalism and brings about an innovation in content that singles out Indian writers among other novelists writing in English. The other is a ‘distinctly Indian use of the English language’, which suggests that the English of Indian writing is no longer the former colonizer’s language, but a new literary language in its own right. In noticing the coexistence of these two features, Buford implies that the challenge faced by Indian writing in English – of having to reconcile a content and a form coming from very different backgrounds – has finally been met.

I would like to argue that this ‘Indian sensibility’ is a matter of performance, a statement of attitude that results in a performative use of the English language. This, in turn, relies on the coexistence of performance and performativity. In the discussion that will follow I will attempt to prove this coexistence, whilst rebutting J.L. Austin’s position that the two categories are mutually exclusive. I will argue that contemporary Indian fiction in English performs Indianness for a worldwide English-reading international audience, whilst also raising issues about it as seen from home. In this fiction, performance and performativity merge as catalysts of the process of novel writing through reinterpretations of myth. I will start my analysis by looking into Buford’s observations on Indian writing in English in more detail and I will relate this to language performativity.

**Writing in English**

The question of writing in English is one that Buford adapts to serve his conclusion: that an incipient Indian literature is taking shape (or, perhaps, is consciously being shaped by this particular issue of *The New Yorker*) in a way reminiscent of the early post-independence struggle of American literature to find its own voice. While pointing out the variety and originality of the literature written by these writers, Buford also describes their use of English in the following terms:

> What can you say about Indian fiction? Too much and too little. You can point to both its extravagances and its spareness. It can be fabulist, realistic, chatty, mad, or wildly eccentric. There are qualities in its